

Quick Facts

About... Hansen's Disease (Leprosy)

What is Hansen's disease?

Hansen's disease (HD), commonly referred to as leprosy, is a complex, long-term infectious bacterial disease. HD continues to exist today, with the largest numbers of cases occurring in Southeast Asia and Central Africa, and smaller numbers occurring in South and Central America and Mexico. There are individuals living in the United States with Hansen's disease, most of whom reside in Texas, Louisiana, Florida, New York, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico.

What are the signs of being sick with this disease?

Early symptoms include a rash, which generally appears as light reddish or pale colored patches, on the trunk or hands and feet. The skin patches get larger and do not go away despite medical treatment. A loss of feeling or weakness in the fingers and toes can also be one of the first signs of HD. If left untreated, nerve damage can result in loss of function of the hands or feet and/or possibly blindness.

How is it spread?

Experts believe the bacterium that causes HD is spread through the air by respiratory droplets. Approximately 95 percent of the world's population has natural resistance to HD. Persons with this resistance will not get HD even if they are exposed. It is not clearly understood why the other 5 percent of the population has no resistance.

How is Hansen's disease diagnosed?

HD can be diagnosed by a biopsy of the rash. A health care provider will take a small sample of skin and send it to a laboratory to see if the bacterium that causes HD can be detected.

How is the disease treated?

HD is treated with specific antibiotics. Treatment usually involves taking three different drugs for a period of six months to two years. Usually, the infected person will become non-infectious within a few days or weeks of beginning treatment. Early treatment can prevent the disabilities often associated with HD.

Who is at highest risk for getting the disease?

Those at greatest risk are family members or close contacts of a person who has HD but is not being treated. Family members at most risk are those with a genetic connection to the case, such as children, brothers and sisters, or parents. The risk is less for a spouse. HD does not easily spread from one person to another, and in most cases, only one person in a family gets the disease.

Can Hansen's disease be prevented?

The best way to prevent the spread of HD is early diagnosis and treatment of people who are infected.

Is there a vaccine that can prevent Hansen's disease?

There is no vaccine available to prevent HD.

For additional information on Hansen's disease, please visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site at:

http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/hansens_t.htm

This page was last reviewed on October 17, 2008



Indiana State
Department of Health